

Herbert Spencer: Libertarian Prophet

by Roderick T. Long

At the time of his death a century ago, the English social theorist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) was widely considered one of the most significant thinkers of his era, a scholar of encyclopedic learning and enormous vision whose works formed a regular part of university curricula in philosophy and the social sciences. Today he is seldom read, and although his name remains famous, his actual ideas are virtually unknown. Textbooks summarize Spencer in a few lines as a “Social Darwinist” who preached “might makes right” and advocated letting the poor die of starvation in order to weed out the unfit—a description unlikely to win him readers.

The textbook summary is absurd, of course. Far from being a proponent of “might makes right,” Spencer wrote that the “desire to command is essentially a barbarous desire” because it “implies an appeal to force,” which is “inconsistent with the first law of morality” and “radically wrong.”¹ While Spencer opposed tax-funded welfare programs, he strongly supported voluntary charity, and indeed devoted ten chapters of his *Principles of Ethics* to a discussion of the duty of “positive beneficence.”²

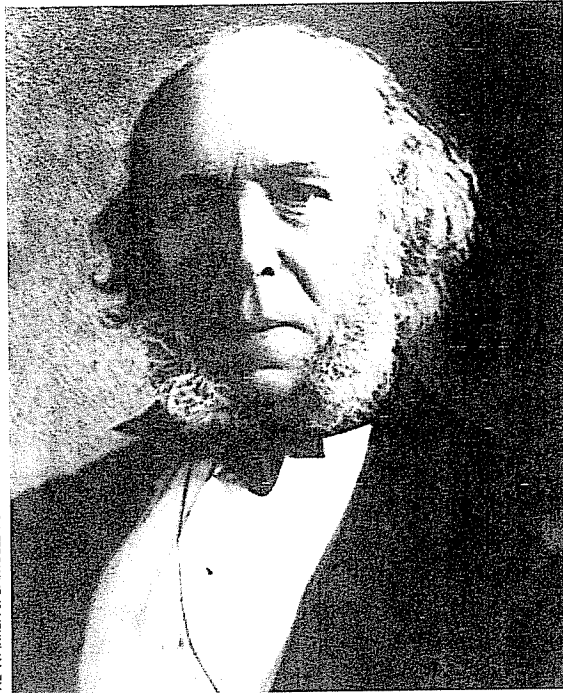
Roderick Long (longrob@mail.auburn.edu) teaches philosophy at Auburn University and maintains the website Praxeology.net. He is the author of *Reason and Value: Aristotle versus Rand* (Objectivist Center).

Spencer’s evolutionary theories predated Darwin’s by several years. For Spencer, neither physical nor social order requires deliberate design for its emergence; language, for example, was not the “cunningly-devised scheme of a ruler or body of legislators,”³ nor is the economic organization of society, without which “a great proportion of us would be dead before another week ended,” to be attributed to “the devising of any one.”⁴ Rather, order arises spontaneously, through the operation of natural laws; industrial civilization emerged “not simply without legislative guidance” but “in spite of legislative hindrances,” through the “individual efforts of citizens to satisfy their own wants.”⁵

The two chief modes of social organization are the *militant*—operating through *compulsory* cooperation and oriented toward violent conflict—and the *industrial*—characterized by *voluntary* cooperation and peaceful exchange.⁶ The militant mode, Spencer maintained, was necessary at a certain stage in human history, before human beings had fully adapted to social existence; but its day is passing. Since “a society in which life, liberty, and property, are secure, and all interests justly regarded, must prosper more than one in which they do not,” the selective pressures of social evolution can be expected to bring about a gradual shift toward the industrial mode.⁷

Spencer’s long-run optimism was tempered, however, by short-run pessimism;

THE WARREN J. SAMUELS PORTRAIT COLLECTION AT DUKE UNIVERSITY.



Herbert Spencer

although militant society was destined to give way to industrial society eventually, there would inevitably be temporary reverses and detours along the way. And Spencer believed that the modern world, after a long period of liberalization, was headed into just such a retrograde phase. Observing an increase in “imperialism, re-barbarization, and regimentation,”⁸ he foresaw this trend’s eventual culmination in a “lapse of self-ownership into ownership by the community.”⁹ Like many classical-liberal thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century, Spencer prophetically predicted for the century to come a grim relapse into collectivism and war.

An Ethics of Liberty

In ethics Spencer dismissed the debate between egoism and altruism, maintaining that human interests, properly understood, are so interdependent that one cannot effectively pursue one’s own welfare without giving others’ needs their due, and vice versa.¹⁰ Life and happiness are a human being’s proper goals, but he can achieve these goals “only by the exercise of his faculties,” and so “must be free to do those things in which the exercise of them consists.” But since all

Spencer’s Law of Equal Freedom

“Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.”

—SOCIAL STATICS

human beings by this argument have a moral license to exercise their faculties, “then must the freedom of each be bounded by the similar freedom of all.”¹¹

Hence Spencer derived a *Law of Equal Freedom*: “Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man.”¹² Concluding that “whatsoever involves command or whatsoever implies obedience is wrong,”¹³ Spencer proceeded to deduce, from the Law of Equal Freedom, the existence of rights to freedom of speech, press, and religion; bodily integrity; private property; and commercial exchange—virtually the entire policy menu of today’s libertarians. His moral theory thus demands the complete displacement of the militant mode of social organization by the industrial.

Spencerian ethics is not exhausted by the Law of Equal Freedom; non-interference is the essence of justice, but ethics comprises beneficence (so long as it is *voluntary*) in addition to justice. Spencer insisted, however, that since production is logically prior to distribution, charitable assistance should aim at helping the needy to become productive rather than habituating them to a condition of dependence.

Liberalism and Democracy

Spencer lived in an age when the word “liberal” was beginning to change from its classical to its modern meaning. Where the earlier liberals had sought to promote the common welfare “as an end to be indirectly gained by the relaxing of restraints,” the new liberals treat the common welfare “as the end to be directly gained,” and by “methods intrinsically opposed to those originally used”—that is, by increasing governmental restraints instead of relaxing them.¹⁴ While the new liberals, like the old, do not “presume to coerce men for their *spiritual good*,” they nonetheless think themselves “called upon to coerce them for their *material good*.”¹⁵ “Most of those who now pass as Liberals,” Spencer concluded, “are Tories of a new type.”¹⁶

To the reply that the liberal state, unlike its predecessors, is justified in employing compulsory methods because its edicts express the will of the majority, Spencer answered that a majority imposing its will on a minority stands as much in violation of the Law of Equal Freedom as does the reverse; the “divine right of parliaments” is no less a “political superstition” than the divine right of kings.¹⁷ Spencer granted the need for majority rule, but only on those matters that fall within the majority’s jurisdiction.¹⁸ The purpose of joining together to form a political community is the protection of individual rights; hence decisions about the *means* to this end fall within the competence of the majority, but decisions *contrary* to this end do not.¹⁹ Modern democracy renders the individual citizen’s refusal of consent invisible; whatever the citizen says or does is viewed through consent-colored spectacles, obliterating the possibility of a *no* that means *no*.²⁰

Spencer saw the decline of liberalism—its deterioration from a doctrine of individual freedom to a doctrine of majoritarian despotism—as part of a general retrogression of modern civilization from industrialism to militarism. For Spencer there was an intimate connection between aggressive warfare abroad and political oppression at

home; a society’s “internal and external policies are . . . bound together.”²¹ He denounced European imperialism as a succession of “deeds of blood and rapine” inflicted on “subjugated races” by “so-called Christian nations.”²² But imperialist policies are harmful to the colonizers as well as to the colonized; war diverts capital from productive to destructive uses, thus squandering “the accumulated labor of generations”—and because it gives the domestic economy an illusory “appearance of increased strength,” a state of war encourages politicians to impose higher taxes which the economy cannot in reality sustain.²³

Militarism vs. Trade

Military action to promote international trade is a fraud: “Trade is a simple enough thing that will grow up wherever there is room for it. But, according to statesmen, it must be created by a gigantic and costly machinery.”²⁴ In fact, such wars are waged not to promote the economic welfare of the common people, Spencer maintained, but instead to benefit powerful special interests, “rich owners”—the beneficiaries of government-granted privileges and monopolies—at the expense of “the poor, starved, overburdened people.”²⁵

While allowing that warfare is permissible as self-defense, Spencer added that few wars described as “defensive” really are such, and denounced any nation that “gives to its soldiers the euphemistic title ‘defenders of their country,’ and then exclusively uses them as invaders of other countries.”²⁶ Spencer thus opposed his own nation’s military adventures in Afghanistan, India, South Africa (the Boer War), and elsewhere.

Foreign expansionism, Spencer taught, brings domestic tyranny in its wake. Given that “the nations of Europe are partitioning among themselves parts of the earth inhabited by inferior peoples, with cynical indifference to the claims of these peoples,” the governments of these nations can hardly be expected to “have so tender a regard” for the rights of their own citizens.²⁷ Indeed,

“the exercise of mastery inevitably entails on the master himself some form of slavery,” since “unless he means to let his captive escape, he must continue to be fastened by keeping hold of the cord.”²⁸ Hence the need to maintain the subjugation of foreign peoples inevitably requires an ever greater imposition of constraints on the conquering state’s domestic citizens as well, until “the army is simply the mobilized society and the society is the quiescent army”²⁹

While the long-run tendency of social evolution, he believed, is toward industrial society, and thus toward peace, Spencer viewed the immediate future with despair—in his later years increasingly so. The inexorable short-run trend of modern civilization, he came to believe, is toward greater political centralization, hyper-regulation, and militarism; as governments grow more powerful, popular culture grows more vulgar and brutal, each trend serving to reinforce the other. The few remaining lovers of peace and liberty are doomed to political irrelevance as militant society regains dominance for the foreseeable future.

At the time of Spencer’s death the number of libertarians was indeed dwindling. Today, a century later, it is growing. The centralized, hierarchical information channels of the political elite have been superseded by the Internet, the supreme embodiment of voluntaristic, “industrial” social interaction. The state still regulates, regiments, and kills, but an antithetical mode of life is sprouting in its interstices.

Spencer saw his own voluminous writings as a bitter cry of protest in the face of irresistible defeat. But for those of us who stand

at the beginning of the 21st century, they can serve instead as an inspiration in our struggle to reverse the trend of history from the militant to the industrial mode. □

1. Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics: The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1970), pp. 144–45, available online at oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/ToC/0331_ToC.html.

2. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics* (2 vols.), ed. Tibor R. Machan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1978), available online at oll.libertyfund.org/Texts/ToC/0155_ToC.html.

3. Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State, with Six Essays on Government, Society, and Freedom* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), p. 437; available online at www.econlib.org/library/LFBooks/Spencer/spnMvSContents.html.

4. Herbert Spencer, *Illustrations of Universal Progress: A Series of Discussions* (Chestnut Hill Mass.: Elibron Classics, 2000), p. 320.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 320.

6. *The Man vs. the State*, p. 6.

7. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 2 (New York: D. Appleton, 1884), p. 608.

8. Herbert Spencer, *Facts and Comments* (New York: D. Appleton, 1902), p. 200.

9. Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 3 (New York: D. Appleton, 1910), p. 605.

10. *Principles of Ethics*, vol. 1, pp. 217–85.

11. *Social Statics*, p. 69.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 95. (This is the passage to which Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was referring when, in his famous dissent in *Lochner v. New York*, he opined: “The Fourteenth Amendment does not enact Mr. Herbert Spencer’s *Social Statics*.”)

13. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

14. *The Man Versus the State*, pp. 14–15.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 267–68.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 123.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

19. What about people who do not wish to join any political community, for any purpose? In his first book, *Social Statics* (1851), Spencer included a chapter on “The Right to Ignore the State”; in later years he deleted the chapter from subsequent editions, apparently embarrassed by its anarchistic implications.

20. *Social Statics*, p. 190.

21. *The Man Versus the State*, p. 174.

22. *Social Statics*, pp. 328–29.

23. *The Man Versus the State*, p. 211.

24. *Social Statics*, p. 323.

25. *The Man Versus the State*, p. 220.

26. *Principles of Ethics*, vol. 2, p. 67.

27. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 239–40.

28. *Facts and Comments*, p. 158.

29. *The Man Versus the State*, p. 74.